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PIONEER SERIES — No. 5

Melinda Rankin

First Protestant Missionary in Mexico

BY

MRS. O. W. SCOTT

Price 2 Cents

"I seemed to hear the word 'Forward!'"

WOMAN'S FOREIGN MISSIONARY SOCIETY
OF THE
METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
PUBLICATION OFFICE
BOSTON, MASS.

Melinda Rankin

Have you ever thought how missionaries are called? It is now as in the days when Jesus was upon earth and spoke to the men who were to be His apostles. He said, "Follow Me," to the fishermen and the publican, and they "left all and followed Him." There might have been other men all around Him who were wiser and braver than they, but He saw that these were ready to learn and to follow.

So to-day He says to one here and another there, "Go carry my word to those who sit in darkness." He calls them sometimes when they are young, like Samuel, and nobody can explain how it happens, but such souls hear His voice and are willing and glad to obey.

'Tis the *willing* hand God uses
To scatter Gospel seed.

It was early in the last century (1811), while William Carey was doing pioneer work in India and Robert Morrison in China, that a little girl was born among the green hills of New England, who was destined to be a pioneer in sunny Mexico.

Melinda Rankin grew up and was educated like scores of other

New England girls, but even while a schoolgirl she felt that women could do many things to help the world which they were not expected to do. By and by she felt that *she* was called to do some unusual work, and a little later, when she was converted, this feeling grew very strong.

She seemed to hear an urging voice, which said, "Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and come into the land which I will show thee." But there was no "open door" to foreign missions for young women in Melinda Rankin's day, so she became a teacher in district school and in Sunday-school, waiting quietly for further direction.

In 1840 there came a call for missionary teachers to go to the Mississippi Valley to work among Catholics from Europe who had settled there. Miss Rankin heard and answered, "Here am I." She went first to Kentucky, where she taught two years, then on to Mississippi, where for nearly four years she helped establish schools and secure teachers. About this time the war between Mexico and the United States closed, and soldiers who had gone from Mississippi returned home. From them she heard about Mexico, and how its people were deprived of the Bible by a cruel priesthood.

Instantly she saw the need and said, "I resolved, God helping me, to go myself to Mexico." But Mexican laws prevented this,

and the best she could do was to settle as near that country as possible. For a time — until 1852 — she taught in Huntsville Academy, then removed to Brownsville, which was on the American side of the Rio Grande, just opposite Matamoras, in Mexico.

Here she rented two rooms ; one to live in, one for the school she wished to open for Mexican girls. The day before she wished to begin her work she went to her rooms. She says, "At dark I had no bed to sleep on, nor did I know how I was to obtain my breakfast, to say nothing of supper. But before the hour of retiring came a Mexican woman brought me a cot, an American woman sent me a pillow, and a German woman came and said she would cook my meals and bring them to me. Did I not feel rich that night, as I retired to my humble cot ?"

The next morning she opened her school with five Mexican girls. In a short time she had thirty or forty, but lived in constant terror of Indians and lawless Mexicans, who, she was told, "would take her life for the dress she took off at night." For weeks she could not sleep, but finally cast herself so fully upon her Heavenly Father's care that she says : "I slept as if I knew a sentinel was placed at each corner of my dwelling."

She also began to circulate Bibles among the people. They were eager to read "the forbidden book," and soon hundreds were

in Mexican families. She was not allowed to cross the river, but she knew that Bibles were crossing it every day in the hands of Mexicans, and that they were the "good seed," which must bring a future harvest.

In fact, she began to see the harvest at once. She says, "A mother of one of the little girls in my school came to my door one day, bringing her 'saint,' as she called it. She said she had prayed to it all her life and it had never done her any good, and asked if I would take the saint and give her a Bible for it." Miss Rankin did this gladly, giving her *two* Bibles, one for herself and one for a friend in Matamoras.

Just here we can give Miss Rankin's own words from a letter written to Miss Frances Baker of Michigan in 1888 for children, and which has never before been published. She says: "Many years ago the writer of this article heard that many thousands of children in Mexico had no Bible, no Sunday-schools and no teachers who could instruct them in those things which our blessed Saviour intended all Christians should know.

"How to reach those poor children was a very difficult question, as the laws of Mexico proclaimed, 'No Bible or Bible teachers shall come into our country, but everybody must be Roman Catholic.' Now that kind of religion taught that children, instead of going

directly to the loving Jesus and praying to Him, should pray to images and pictures of saints, who could not hear nor answer their prayers.

"This first missionary could only get upon the border of that miserable country, and there she opened a school and taught hundreds of Mexican children of the teachings of the Saviour in His holy word, wherein He says, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not.' The Mexican children were not slow to learn that the Saviour loved them and that they must obey what He says in the Bible.

"This first knowldge produced a great change in their habits and practices. Now I feel sorry to tell you that these children would lie and steal and do many bad things, but when they learned from the Bible how very naughty it was to do such things, they left off their wicked practices and became as truthful and honest as you, or any other children who live under the light of God's word.

"After some three or four years those dreadful laws were changed in Mexico, and the Bible and teachers were permitted to go and enlighten those poor people who had been bound in chains of darkness for hundreds of years. The first missionary lost no time in going into the country and building a big schoolhouse, in which many children were instructed.

"The parents, too, gladly embraced the religion of the Bible,

and soon a church was formed, which was the first true church in Mexico. Thousands of Bibles were now scattered broadcast over the land, and soon the poor Mexicans began to realize that a brighter day had dawned upon their long night of darkness. Churches and schools sprang up all over the country, and now there are thousands of converted Mexicans, who are the true followers of Christ."

The "big schoolhouse" which Miss Rankin mentions in this letter, was one she built in Brownsville with funds collected in the United States. This was the "new seminary" which she entered in 1854. Threats were made to burn it and kill the missionary, but through these terrible trials she felt that she was "shut up in God's pavilion."

Soon after entering the new school her sister came to her help, but three years later she died, just as Mexico was struggling into religious liberty. Two nieces came and were with her when the Civil war broke out, and she was ordered out of her seminary because she sympathized with the North.

Then she took her books and furniture, went across the Rio Grande into Mexico and opened a school in Matamoras, and was, as she says, "supremely happy." But the war again interfered and she went with her nieces to New Orleans, where they worked in hospitals and in the first schools started for freedmen.

Early in 1864 Brownsville was captured by the Union army, and back she went to find her seminary "badly damaged by gunpowder." She had it repaired, and soon enrolled sixty pupils. The next year she left this school to the care of others and went to Monterey, where after three months of thought and prayer, she decided to establish *the first Protestant mission in Mexico.*

Again she went to the United States, secured money and erected the necessary buildings. Miss Rankin still met persecution, but the work grew. Bibles were circulated by native converts who went from house to house. Work was opened in Zacetecas, three hundred miles away, and a church was built by the Mexicans themselves, whose membership was one hundred and seventy.

And now, after twenty years of pioneer toil, Miss Rankin's health began to fail. The work required ordained ministers, and she must yield it to stronger hands. In 1872 she returned to the United States and gave her mission to the American Board.

After a few years, during which she visited the Mexican churches and interested the people in them, she retired to her home in Bloomington, Ill., where she died, December 7, 1888, in her seventy-seventh year. The letter which we have quoted was written for Methodist children in January, 1888.